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Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences 199 (2015) 231 – 239

Procedia
Social and Behavioral Sciences

GlobELT: An International Conference on Teaching and Learning English as an Additional
Language, Antalya - Turkey

The effect of explicit instruction on pragmatic competence development; teaching requests to EFL learners of English

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Abstract

Pragmatic competence is one of the aspects of language that provides many challenges for EFL learners. L2 learners need to develop their pragmatic competence in order to use language appropriately according to the socio-cultural norms of the L2 community. And, this may be achieved through treatment they receive from their teachers. The issue explored in this study was the investigation of the effect of explicit instruction of pragmatic level on appropriate performance of request speech act across two proficiency levels with regard to two social variables of status and distance. To this end, pre-posttest design with experimental and control group was administered. Data were collected using a Discourse Completion Test (DCT). The selection of requestive situations in DCT was based on two mentioned social variables. The results revealed that explicit instruction is a facilitative tool to develop L2 learners' pragmatic competence. Moreover, it was found that L2 proficiency influence on overall appropriateness of speech acts production. The findings of the current study have some implications for teachers, text book writers and curriculum designers.

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Peer-review under responsibility of Hacettepe Üniversitesi.

Keywords: Explicit instruction; Request speech act; Pragmatic competence; EFL learners

1. Introduction

Pragmatic competence is one of the essential components of communicative competence. According to (Crystal, 1997, as cited in Rose and Kasper, 2001, p. 2), "Pragmatics is the study of language from the point of view of users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction, and the effects their use of language has on other participants in the act of communication". It is knowledge of communicative action, how to carry it out and the ability to use language appropriately according to contextual factors (Kasper, 1997).

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Pragmatics consists of conventional rules of language which are manifested in the production and interpretation of utterances. In particular, it helps the speakers analyze the conditions that make the utterances acceptable in some situations. Therefore, lack of mastery of conversational norms involved in production of speech acts may result in breakdown in communication. According to Thomas (1983), a failure in considering these parameters results in the communication breakdown or misunderstanding. Thus, pragmatic competence is the knowledge that speaker-hearer uses to engage in communication, including how speech acts are successfully performed.

The speech act theory was first proposed by Austin (1962). It is one of the central concepts of pragmatics. Searle (1969, p. 16) defines speech acts as "basic or minimal units of linguistic communications". As cited in Istifci and Kampusu (2009, p. 16), Schmidt and Richards (1980) define speech acts as "all the acts we perform through speaking, all the things we do when we speak and the interpretation and negotiation of speech acts are dependent on the discourse or context". Speech acts are complicated associations between utterances. Austin (1962) recognized three separate levels of action beyond the act of utterance itself, namely locutionary act, illocutionary act, and prelocutionary act. Among the three acts, Yule (1996) stated that, the illocutionary act is considered as the most distinctive one: "Indeed, the term speech act is generally interpreted quite, narrowly to mean only the illocutionary force of an utterance". (p. 49). Because it is actually what the speaker wants to acquire through the action of saying the sentence.

Most of illocutionary and prelocutionary acts are performed in an explicit way, though there are many ways in which a speech act can be conducted implicitly. So, lack of ability to use language according to contextual factors or absence of the cultural and pragmatic situations in cross-cultural communication can lead to breakdown in communication. This normally is the case in speeches of non-native speakers of a language especially when the distance between the two cultures is great. When L2 language learners do not obey these rules, due to lack of knowledge or cultural differences, their utterance may be observed as meaningless or rude. And by the development of speech act theory, learners have gained better understanding of what speakers aim to perform various functions effectively and appropriately. Speech acts can be thought of as "functions" of language, such as complaining, thanking, apologizing, requesting, refusing and inviting. Hence, speech act theory has encouraged researchers concentrating on speech acts. As a result teachers become aware of exchange of situational, sociolinguistic and linguistic types of competencies.

Request is one of the most difficult speech acts for learners and it requires high levels of appropriateness and appreciable cultural and linguistic proficiency on the part of the learners (Blum- Kulka & Olshtain, 1984). According to Blum- Kulka and Olshtain (1984), there should be an effort to "minimize the imposition involved in the act of request". For minimizing the imposition, indirect strategies can be used. Thus, request strategies were categorized in to three levels of directness in the cross- cultural speech act realization project (CCSARP) developed by Blum- Kulka, House, Kasper, (1989), a coding scheme which is the most desired model of request studies. Research has shown that speakers of different languages adjust their request differently and kinds and recurrence of request strategies change according to contextual factors such as social dominance, social distance and gender (Lin, 2009). Thus, knowing how request speech acts are produced both in native and target language for EFL learners is of significant importance. Since, acquiring pragmatic competence demands lots of effort on the part of the EFL learners, raising the students' awareness about different ways of expressing request may help students learning request strategies. Accordingly, this study aims at investigating the effect of explicit teaching of request strategies to EFL learners.

2. Literature Review

In language teaching, communicative competence is defined as the students' ability to "understand the essential points of what a native speaker says... in a real communicative situation" as well as "respond in such a way that the native speaker interpret to response with little or no effort and without errors that are so distracting that they interfere drastically with communication" (Terrell, 1977, p. 326, cited in Kramsch, 1996). In addition, most of linguists and educational specialists emphasized that foreign language learners often show significant differences from native speakers in comprehending and performing certain speech acts. Kasper (1997) argues that a learner of high grammatical or linguistic proficiency might not necessarily show equivalent pragmatic development. So, for

the sake of development of pragmatic competence automatically or sufficiently, instruction in pragmatics is necessary.

Rose (2000) used an oral production task to investigate the speech acts of request, apologies, and complaints by L2 English learners across three age groups: seven, nine, and eleven years old. The comparison of linguistic expressions using the CCSARP coding framework served evidence of pragmatic development, in the use of direct to more indirect expressions. The oldest group used more indirect expressions and supportive moves to frame their speech acts, similar to native speaker pattern. This study approved that, higher level learners were closer to native speaker patterns in their choice of linguistic expressions in speech acts comparing with lower proficiency learners.

As cited in Shahidi Tabar (2012), Salmani (2008) conducted a study on performing request speech act among Persian speakers. He confirms that Native speakers of Persian use conventionally indirect (CI) strategies in their requestive speech act. According to Salmani (2008), in situations where there is a social distance between interlocutors, direct requests are very rare, but in situations, where there is no social distance, Persian native speakers frequently use direct request as if they had a potential for expressing camaraderie and friendship.

Taghizade Mahani (2012) reported the findings of the study of realization of request speech act in EFL context from different English proficiency levels. The findings showed that there was evidence of pragmatic development across the English proficiency levels of Iranian learners in terms of directness as well as English baseline data from ten British native speakers, respectively. The findings revealed that advanced level learners, compared to the other levels, showed requestive production closer to that of the British participants. Iranian learners at this and lower levels required further development of their pragmatic competence.

3. Methodology

3.1. Statement of the problem

Previous research showed that linguistic proficiency does not guarantee communicative efficiency (Eslami-Raskh, 2005; Meier, 1997). Therefore, possessing broad range of vocabulary, native-like pronunciation and a profound knowledge of grammatical structure are not sufficient to master the English language. To be able to communicate in a foreign language pragmatic competence is required on the part of the L2 learner which in turn demands sufficient ability in applying techniques and strategies in performing speech acts appropriately. Teaching speech acts gives EFL students the opportunity to become acquainted with sociolinguistic conventions of language use and cultural differences which form proper use in English as opposed to their first socio-linguistic system. Unfortunately teaching speech acts as an aspect of socio-cultural skill is not emphasized in English courses in high schools, institutions, and universities. Consequently, Iranian EFL learners often fail to recognize the correct functions of speech acts in EFL educational context. Accordingly, the present study attempts to investigate the effect of explicit instruction of request speech act on Iranian EFL learners' pragmatic competence development. Therefore, the present study sought to answer the following questions:

1. Is explicit instruction of request speech act facilitative for L2 pragmatic development at different proficiency levels?
2. Is there any significant difference between Iranian EFL learners' pragmatic competence in terms of request speech act at different levels of proficiency after receiving instruction?

3.2. Participants

At the beginning of the term, Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was administered and 73 female students of four EFL classes took part in this test. As a result, two of classes were at intermediate level and two were at advanced level. Each of the intermediate and advanced classes consisted of a range of 17-20 students which were assigned to control and experimental groups. The participants were all native Persian speaking students. Their age ranged from 10 to 14 for intermediate groups and 14 to 18 for advanced groups.

3.3. Instruments

Oxford Placement Test: Oxford Placement Test 1 (OPT) (Allen, 2004) is a validated placement test published by Oxford University Press. As it is stated in the test's instruction pamphlet, it provides teachers an efficient tool to place students at the start of a course. To achieve the goals of this study, the OPT was used at the beginning of the term (see Appendix A). As long as the students were studying English at intermediate and advance levels of the institute, the placement test was used to ensure level of proficiency.

DCT as Pre-test: At the onset of the study, a pre-test, in terms of Discourse Completion Task (DCT) was used. DCT is a kind of questionnaire which contains series of concisely defined situations used to elicit special speech acts (Varghese & Billmyer, 1996, p. 40). DCT is considered as a relevant means of data collection at early stage of learning communicative functions of target language. By means of DCTS, researchers can gather information about the kinds of semantic formulas that students use to recognize different illocutionary acts (Ellis, 1994, p. 164). The DCT used in the pre-test consisted of four request scenarios and was used to assess the students' pre-existing knowledge on the course topic for further comparison with post-test. The students were asked to write desired speech acts.

DCT as Post-test: At the end of the term a post-test in terms of DCTs comprising of 12 situations was administered to the participants of both experimental and control groups in order to measure the effect of treatment.

3.4. Procedure of data collection

This study was carried out in three major phases, pre-test, treatment program, and post test. In the first phase, OPT was given to 77 students of four EFL classes of a private English institute (Alpha) in Ilam, Ilam province, Iran. Becoming sure about the student's proficiency levels, learners at intermediate and advanced levels were assigned to both control and experimental groups. Then, a pretest, in terms of DCTs, was assigned to measure the students' pragmatic competence in request speech act to certify comparability of groups prior to their treatment. The DCT included 4 situations, four requestive situations; each situation was followed by a blank space in which students were asked to write their desired speech acts. Treatment group received instruction of the mentioned speech acts for half an hour; ten minutes for each of them, while control group did not receive any treatment. At the end of the term, a post test similar to that of the pre-test was administered to both control and experimental groups to assess the probable changes in their strategy use. Then, the received data were coded and scored based on the scoring process cited in Farahian, Rezaee and Gholami (2012), "there were four aspects of appropriacy as rating and the analytic likert 5 for marking was employed". Therefore, scale of 5 indicates 'completely appropriate'; scale 4 refers to 'mostly appropriate', scale of 3 as 'generally appropriate'; scale of 2 means 'not very appropriate but acceptable'; scale 1 indicates 'not appropriate and not acceptable'. The appropriacy of the data was determined based on CCSARP Coding Scheme proposed by Blum- Kulka (1989).

After coding the data based on the models which are presented below, they were entered into SPSS (version 20) software to analyze them. To achieve the goals of the study, descriptive and inferential statistics were employed that will be presented in the next chapter at length.

4. Results and discussion

The present study aimed to examine the relationship between instruction and pragmatic performance of Iranian EFL students and their possible interaction with the proficiency levels. To achieve the goals of the study, the data were analyzed through descriptive and inferential statistics. The results are presented in tables below followed by the subsequent discussion.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of pre-test of control and experimental groups at intermediate level

Speech acts	scenarios	percentages					Mean	Std. Deviation
		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)		
Control	Scenario 1	16.7	66.7	16.7	0	0	2.0000	.59409
	Scenario 2	0	38.9	50.0	11.1	0	2.7222	.66911
	Scenario 3	72.2	27.8	0	0	0	1.2778	.46089
	Scenario 4	27.8	66.7	0	5.6	0	1.8333	.070711
Experimental	Scenario 1	30.0	55.0	15.0	0	0	1.8500	.67082
	Scenario 2	10.0	45.02	30.0	15.0	0	2.5000	.88852
	Scenario 3	65.0	35.0	0	0	0	1.3500	.48936
	Scenario 4	30.0	60.0	5.0	5.0	0	1.8500	.74516

As it is clear from this table , in performing request speech acts by control group, the mean score for (scenario 1) is 2.0000, for (scenario2) the mean score is 2.7222, for (scenario3), mean=1.2778, and for (scenario4), mean=1.8333. For experimental group, the mean score of (scenario 1) =1.8500, for (scenario2), mean=2.5000, for (scenario3), mean=1.3500, for (scenario4), mean=1.8500. As it is evident, the difference between control and experimental groups regarding their performance was not very much, though this should be detected by the means of inferential statistics.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of pretest of control and experimental groups at advanced level

Speech acts	scenarios	percentages					Mean	Std. Deviation
		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)		
Control	Scenario 1	5.9	70.6	23.5	0	0	2.1765	.52859
	Scenario 2	0	35.3	58.8	5.9	0	2.7059	.58787
	Scenario 3	64.7	35.3	0	0	0	1.3529	.49259
	Scenario 4	23.5	64.7	0	11.8	0	2.0000	.86603
Experimental	Scenario 1	22.2	50.0	27.8	0	0	2.0556	.72536
	Scenario 2	0	50.0	44.4	5.6	0	2.5556	.61570
	Scenario 3	44.4	44.4	11.1	0	0	1.6667	.68599
	Scenario 4	16.7	77.8	0	5.6	0	1.9444	.63914

As it is clear from Table 2, in performing request speech act by control group, the mean score for (scenario1)=2.1765, for (scenario2) mean=2.7059, for (scenario3) mean=1.3529, for (scenario4) mean=2.0000. In performing request speech act by experimental group, mean score for (scenario1) is 2.0556, for (scenario2) mean=2.5556, for (scenario3) mean=1.6667, and for (scenario4) mean=1.9444.

Table 3. Independent sample T-test of pre-test of both control and experimental groups at intermediate level

		t-test for equality of means				t	df	Sig (2-tailed)
		Mean Differences	Std. Error Differences	95% confidence interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Intermediate	Equal variances assumed	-.07083	.11602	-.30613	.16446	-.611	36	.545
Advanced		-.25000	.16667	-.60164	.10164	-1.500	17	.152

According to the results of the above table, p value is higher than .05. As for pre-request, it equals to .545. So, no significant difference is observable in the pre-tests of control and experimental groups at both levels. Accordingly, both control and experimental groups had almost similar knowledge at the beginning of the term in the case of the mentioned speech acts.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics of post test of control and experimental groups at intermediate levels

Speech acts	scenarios	percentages					Mean	Std. Deviation
		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)		
Control at intermediate level	Scenario 1	22.2	66.7	11.1	0	0	1.8889	.58298
	Scenario 2	16.7	38.9	38.9	5.6	0	2.3333	.84017
	Scenario 3	27.8	66.7	5.6	0	0	1.7778	.54832
	Scenario 4	16.7	66.7	5.6	11.1	0	2.1111	.83235
Experimental at intermediate level	Scenario 1	5.0	20.0	45.0	25.0	5.0	3.0500	.94451
	Scenario 2	5.0	0	50.0	25.0	20.0	3.6000	.88258
	Scenario 3	10.0	55.0	35.0	0	0	2.2500	.63867
	Scenario 4	30.0	25.0	35.0	5.0	5.0	2.3000	1.12858

As it is clear from this table, in performing request speech act in control group at intermediate level, the mean score for (scenario1) is 1.8889. For (scenario2) mean=2.3333, for (scenario3) mean=1.7778, for (scenario4) mean=2.1111. For experimental group at intermediate level, the mean score for (scenario1) is 3.0500, for (scenario2) mean=3.6000, for (scenario3) mean=2.2500, and for (scenario4) mean=2.3000.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics of post test of control and experimental groups at advanced levels

Speech acts	scenarios	percentages					Mean	Std. Deviation
		(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)		
Control at advanced level	Scenario 1	0	70.6	29.4	0	0	2.2941	.46967
	Scenario 2	0	41.2	52.9	5.9	0	2.6471	.60634
	Scenario 3	35.3	52.9	11.8	0	0	1.7647	.66421
	Scenario 4	23.5	70.6	0	5.9	0	1.8824	.69663
Experimental at advanced level	Scenario 1	0	11.1	61.1	27.8	0	3.1667	.61835
	Scenario 2	0	0	55.6	38.9	5.6	3.5000	.61835
	Scenario 3	0	44.4	50.0	5.6	0	2.6111	.60768
	Scenario 4	0	5.6	77.8	5.6	11.1	3.2222	.73208

As it is clear from this table, mean score in performing request speech act by control group for (scenario1) is 2.2941, for (scenario2) mean=2.6471, for (scenario3) mean=1.7647, and for(scenario4) mean=1.8824. In addition, in performing request speech act by experimental group, the mean score for (scenario1) is 3.1667, for (scenario 2) mean=3.5000, for (scenario3) mean=2.6111, and for (scenario4) mean=3.2222.

Table 6. Comparison of post test of control and experimental groups at both levels

		t-test for equality of means				t	df	Sig (2-tailed)
		Mean Differences	Std. Error Differences	95% confidence interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
intermediate	Equal variances assumed	.77222	.16523	.43712	1.10733	4.674	36	.000
Advanced	Equal variances assumed	.97794	.13215	.7090	1.24680	7.40	33	.000

In this table post tests of control and experimental group were compared at both levels. The results showed that there were significant differences in performing request speech act between experimental and control groups at both level because the obtained p values are lower than the accepted level at .05.

Table 7. Paired samples test of pre and post test of control and experimental groups at both levels

Groups		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Control Intermediate	Pre-post	-.06944	.32995	.07777	-.2335	.0946	-.893	17	.384
Experimental intermediate	Pre-post	-.91250	.78336	.17516	-1.2791	-.5458	-5.209	19	.000
Control advanced	Pre-post	-.0882	.27869	.06759	-.2315	.05505	-1.305	16	.210
Experiment advanced	Pre-post	-1.0694	.20661	.04870	-1.1721	-.9667	-21.960	17	.000

According to the results presented in table 5, there is no significant difference between the pre and post tests of control groups at both levels because sig is higher than .05. On the other hand, significant differences are obtained at $p=.000$ which show that control and experimental groups showed significant differences at the post test. This implies that pragmatic knowledge of experimental groups improved in the case of performing request strategy after treatment.

Table 8. Total comparison of both pre and post test of experimental groups across two proficiency levels.

		t-test for equality of means				t	df	Sig (2-tailed)
		Mean Differences	Std. Error Differences	95% confidence interval of the Difference				
				Lower	Upper			
Pre-test	Equal variances assumed	.32895	.08508	.15639	.50151	3.866	36	.000
Post-test	Equal variances assumed	.31579	.09176	.12970	.50188	3.442	36	.001

Table 8 shows that there is significant difference between both intermediate and advanced experimental groups in pretest and post test results. Also, the amount of mean differences were positive, so it can be said that students at advanced level the participants showed better performance in performing the mentioned speech acts in both pre and posttest. Therefore, it seems that proficiency level and grammatical competence affect pragmatic appropriateness.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

As mentioned earlier, the aim of the present study was to investigate the effect of explicit instruction of several strategies of request speech act on the EFL students' pragmatics competence in terms of appropriateness of performing requestive acts. In so doing, A total of 73 EFL learners in both intermediate and advanced level participated in the study during 25 sessions of instruction. They were asked to answer DCTs as pretest and post test. The DCTs consisted of 4 request situations, and at the end of the term post test (4 requestive situations) were administered.

The pretest analysis indicated that both control and experimental groups had the same level of competence. To examine students' performance of request speech act, the differences between pre and post tests were investigated at intermediate level. The results showed that there was a significant difference in the experimental group students' knowledge between pre and post tests while this was not the case with control group. For advanced level, similar to intermediate level, pre and post tests consisted of four request situations were conducted. At first, pre test was assigned to both control and experimental groups. Data analysis showed resemblance between students pragmatic knowledge in both groups. At the end of the term post tests were administered. The investigation of the results of experimental groups at the post test showed meaningful difference between the reported results of pre test, so that students' pragmatic competence improved. Conversely, no significant changes were reported between pre and post test results of control group. So, explicit instruction was facilitative for performing request speech act across both proficiency levels.

The findings suggest the necessity of incorporating consciousness-raising activities in the classroom, and this research indicates that explicit instruction of pragmatic knowledge is more beneficial to the realization of request. The results of this study are in harmony with the finding of Jalilifar, Hashemian, and Tabatabaee (2011) who found that there is a positive correlation between the use of indirect type of requesting and the EFL learner' proficiency levels. Additionally, the results of this study, regarding the relationship between instruction and pragmatic development across two proficiency levels, revealed pragmatic is teachable and it should be taught hand in hand with grammatical knowledge. As Bardovi-Harlig (1996) stated that teaching pragmatic could be successful, due to the fact that quite simply observation of language learners revealed that there was a demonstrated need for it. This could signal a requirement for raising the awareness of Iranian EFL teachers to become more aware of social and cultural norms of the target language while they are teaching, and students should be taught how to perform different speech acts appropriately in different social situations with different social values.

Analyzing Iranian EFL students' pragmatic competence can lead the teachers to be aware of learners need to become knowledgeable in both rules of grammar and sociocultural factors underlying the target language, in order to be pragmatically competent. This can provide valuable resources for teachers, text book writers and curriculum designers. Teachers should bear in mind that L2 learners need more knowledge not only about grammar but also about sociolinguistic rules of the L2 speech community to be able to put their knowledge of language in to practice, and so become competent in the target language.

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